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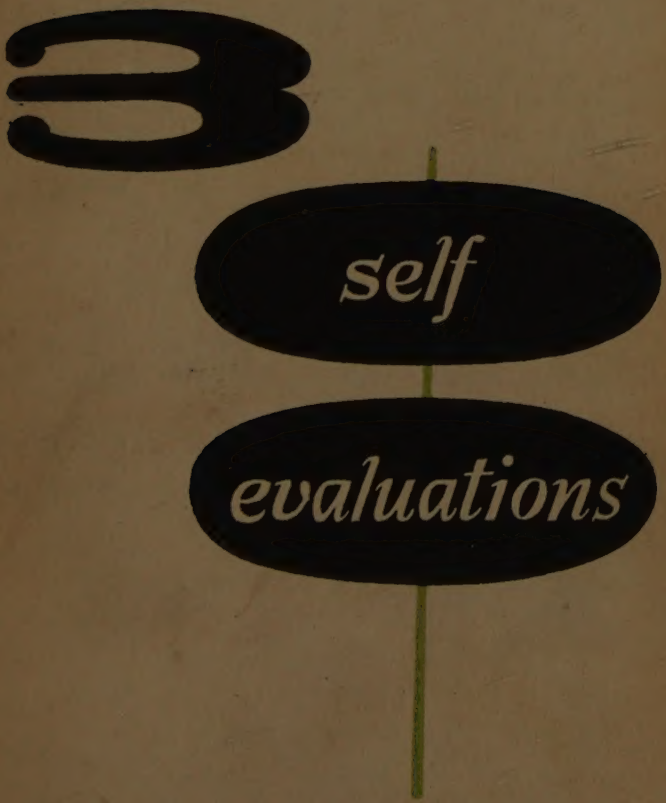

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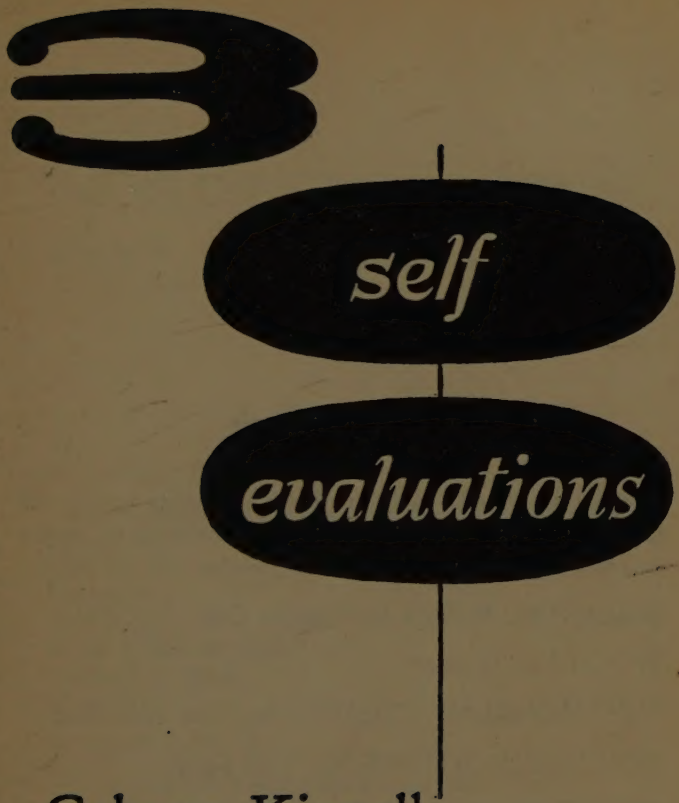

Galway Kinnell

Anthony Ostroff

Winfield Townley Scott

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THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

Volume 4 - Number 1 Chapbook No. 2

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This Chapbook is the result of a deceptively simple request. These poets were asked to fill twelve pages of space for us. Instructions were minimal: **they** were to make the selections both from their unpublished and, contrary to the usual policy of the magazine, their published works. Then they were to evaluate their choice.

The results make up this issue of the **Journal.** Its implications, we feel, are interesting.

Three poets (all of them technically "conservative") present three radically different approaches to their work. Three poets (all of them tremendously interested in their relationship with the creative process) hold serious reservations about their relationship with the critical process as it applies to their own work. Three poets (all of them sure of their work) hesitate about their selections.

The reader must draw his own conclusions from this strange (but common) series of seeming paradoxes. We present the material only as further evidence of the restless and provocative workings of the poetic mind.

The Editors

1

"ONLY MEANING IS TRULY INTERESTING. . ."

I move in this brief poetics from the periphery to the center. First is the matter of poetic organization. Each poem develops in a tension between an abstract "meaning" and its living details. The problem of structure, of architecture, is the problem of reconciling these two into a poem. If this is done successfully, the various details emerge from the process properly subordinated and informed with the meaning of the whole.

Structure in another sense includes considerations of stanza, rhyme, meter, etc. Some such formal constant is needed to set limits on otherwise unmanageable problems of composition, but a slavish obedience to them can be as deadly as the diffuseness attendant upon their neglect.

These are not new notions, by any means. They now receive, however, less attention than they deserve. At least the problems of structure and meaning appear to be less successfully handled by modern poets than the problems of achieving specific effects in individual lines and images. Sometimes the meaning is even thought of as a peg on which to hang the poetry—the dry and ironic on the one hand, or the free and magical on the other—that impressive language of modern verse.

But when the beauty of a poem is chiefly dependent on the separate effects of its parts, then odd language and startling imagery tend to become ends in themselves. Instead of thinking of language as expressive of meaning, poets search for language that is novel, or shocking. But only meaning is truly interesting; and this explains why the so-called experimental schools are the most boring and imitative of all. Concern with the brilliance of discrete parts, without a deeper concern for the structure and meaning of the poem as a whole, is likely to produce verse that possesses only a verbal cleverness.

There is another danger, too, illustrated by all but the best of modern poems. That is that the poems, by oc-

cupying themselves with their discrete effects, lose real connection with nature itself. The reader's interest is fixed at the verbal level, on how a thing is said, and seldom seriously on the thing itself. Socrates remarked: "Don't imagine that we ought to paint the eyes so beautiful that they don't look like eyes at all, or paint any of the other limbs in that manner. You must consider if, by giving each part its proper colour, we make the whole beautiful." For the very effort to beautify a single description can remove the reader another degree from the thing described. The poem is then more an imitation of language than of nature.

There is nothing wrong with not imitating nature except that language does not serve another use. Words are signs, and to take lightly their significance is simply to abuse language. Signs are meaningful as they refer to something else.

This is my second remark about my own poems. In varying degrees they all rely for their effect on the action or idea which they describe, rather than on the descriptive language itself. Of the poems included here, "Spring Oak" is perhaps the simplest illustration. Reading it should be like opening a window on the thing it is talking about. It is written in a style that is almost the absence of style, a bare rendering of a symbolic action. The meaning and interest of this action are merely discovered by the language, not created by it. "Spring Oak" is moving, if it is, only because it describes clearly an event that itself is moving.

The degree of transparency proper to a poem depends on the kind of poem. Subtle, nervous, or complicated things require a corresponding surface. For instance there are more verbal effects in "Trial for Fire" and "In the Glade at Dusk" than in the others. The danger is that the language will act as a blotter rather than as a glass, and absorb the poem into its own flat surface. The effort, therefore, is to write as transparently as the subject permits.

So I have made two remarks about my poems. First,

that they organize each part according to its "proper color" for the sake of the meaning of the whole poem, and second, that the language, like a window, merely opens on the action or idea in which the meaning of the poem resides.

But there is no need to organize a poem strictly around a meaning unless the meaning is important, more than a "peg." And unless this meaning does really reside in ideas or actions it is pointless, even folly, to refine the style "out of existence," or to decline the temptation toward superficial verbal effects. So that behind these two remarks is a belief of another order, style in the sense of human attitude toward personality and nature: a belief in the meaningfulness of human actions and insights, and a native trust in the meaningfulness of natural things and natural events. The conviction that such meanings are moving and important prompts those two more literary principles and limits my application of them.

But the meaning of the poem does not reside in unselected nature. Poetry is a special organization. The process of organizing a poem, which I said at the outset was peripheral, is also at the center. For the meaning of the poem, though it may be dimly predicted, emerges only in the creative act. The organizing principle comes into full being simultaneously with its embodying detail. In the successful process there is a unifying light, a single vision of meaning, what might be called its tragic illumination. In the mysteries of life as well as of poetry there are these moments of enlightenment, of knowledge. All my poetics follows from the fact that such moments are to me of dear importance, for it is only natural, feeling deeply about them, to recreate them directly and sincerely, even reverently.

All but one of the poems here belong to a group centering around the life of a midwestern boy. If they are ever put into book form they are to be called **Dust of the Earth.** The poem, "Trial for Fire," is included mainly to show that I also write of other things.

Galway Kinnell

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SEVEN POEMS BY GALWAY KINNELL

SPRING OAK

Above the quiet valley and unrippled lake
While woodchucks burrowed new holes, and birds sang,
And radicles began downward and shoots
Committed themselves to the spring
And entered with tiny industrious earthquakes,
A dry-rooted, winter-twisted oak
Revealed itself slowly. And one morning
When the valley underneath was still sleeping
It shook itself and it was all green.

TRIAL FOR FIRE

On the Chicago River the city's firemen
Try their skill on the new equipment:—
A red boat, with green doors, with shining
Nozzles firing fountains of
Chicago River at the drifting sky,
Arrests the hearts of the hurriers-by.

Perhaps it is 1812 they remember,
When, in warm August, just here
(It is mapped on the sidewalk)
The Dearborn stockade sank to its knees,

Or hot 1871
When blisters and shavings were the town.

On the deck are the two races: blacks
And whites mingled together,
Splitting the boat. I think our first
Chicago dweller, Point Sable, was divided too,
Stoked from a black womb by a white sire.
(Not even skin-deep, the melting-pot years.)

Last week I watched while a color line broke:
On a South Side street, negroes and whites
Crossed brick-handed into pastry skulls,
Fists, knives, bottles, and the eardrums
Battered by mother-fouling mutters and screams.
Nor could the blood mix in the neon flames.

(Most of all I remember that boy, that
Savage afterwards heaped in the mothering
Arms of his black girl. . .What hate or remorse!)
We have rebuilt our city—swank, swag,
Industries, towers—but we secure its roots
In infested alleys, our ancestral streets.

Look from the bridge: from vertical nozzles
The bewildered river's black water
Goes towering up, a straight white gust
Away in the blue; and here on the site
Of madness and massacre, we are touched and admire
Those who shall protect it from all fire.

They are charged with this crazy mother—
To hold in her ghettos and towers, her sprawling shell,
The yolk of her millions, the brave and loved,
The tenement-haunted, the poor who ask alms

And get pity, the unpitied rich, those lying afraid
Behind double-locks or awake in luxurious beds.

The trial ends, and we hurry home, as the streets
Darken. Around a policeman's feet on the giant boulevard
In slow tumbles the discarded crimesheets
Skid from the past, and down low sputters
Neon. The skies darken, close down, and from a tower
A searchlight is a simple beacon lifted in the air.

EMIGRANTS

We followed the sun into sunset.
The swaying line of wagons resolved itself
To a circle as dusk darkened the white sails.
Campfires broke out, mere punk on the prairie.
The hard, solemn wind blew eastward, omen
To its breasters of the natural tide.

The wagon-circle ringed one wagon, as though
That one were the ark-bearer; candlelight
Fleshed its canvas skin. Nearby a banjo
And voice contrived a meagre consolation,
A thin song which the wind whisked off, back to
Kentucky cabins and lost seaboard towns,
The song-haunted cradles of the western search.

The coals crumbled and died. Like a loaf of light
Stood the centered wagon, yeasting with life
As the darkness deepened.

Then out of darkness
It came, a spasm of sound, the Snake's cold cry—
Too late we learned of the horse unhobbled
And stolen,—too soon discovered the throat
Of the late singer pouring from his heart
A steady swan-song to the crimson turf.

The wind flared up and moaned in the wheels,
And flapped canvas. And in the confused hour
As the tide stiffened against our voyage,
And men shouted, from the lighted wagon
The first faint crying of a child was sweet.

At dawn the wagons swayed into single file,
The human count unchanged. The wind would veer
Or not, we hardly cared. For the god sun
Above our wandering sailed surely west.

FIRST SONG

Then it was dusk in Illinois, the small boy
After an afternoon of carting dung
Hung on the rail fence, a sapped thing
Weary to crying. Dark was growing tall
And he began to hear the pond frogs all
Calling upon his ear with what seemed their joy.

Soon their sound was pleasant for a boy
Listening in the smoky dusk and the nightfall
Of Illinois, and then from the field two small

8

Boys came bearing cornstalk violins
And rubbed three cornstalk bows with resins,
And they set fiddling with them as with joy.

It was now fine music the frogs and the boys
Did in the towering Illinois twilight make
And into dark in spite of a right arm's ache
A boy's hunched body loved out of a stalk
The first song of his happiness, and the song woke
His heart to the darkness and into the sadness of joy.

IN THE GLADE AT DUSK

I entered the pine wood where a thousand wings
On the needled branches birred like days
In the hive of the past, and came to a place
Of strange quiet, glade where the grave light
Issued on the stumps and the twining grass.

The stump was still scarred and the earth
At the base was black, as if the ritual
Were destined to outlast, like song or flame,
The natural life, seasons that sink singing
Into blazing years, where rite-makers lose their name.

Once a little pack of them lashed every boy
To the stump, so that his toes hung
In the developing fire, and cut him down
When the screams came; then unshod the sufferer,
Who wore on his feet the blisters of a man.

9

And one boy was hanging on a windy day, wind
Sharpening flame, and the flame
Biting deep in flesh, and in his throat a rush
Of screaming blotted himself from the world,
And experience covered innocence like an ash.

Now the grass was flickering through the black
Earth, the ceremonious motion—
But a thrush perched on the stump's peak
Dumb as if he had no sense—
I set his cold feet packing with a rock.

Yet the spirit of the wood remained
And I stayed obediant—heard in the trees
The days begin, and in the grave
Light leaned my body waiting—for what,
If not a flame to make me brave?

And the days of the suffered flame
Forsook me, and the days to be suffered
Ringed me around, as the sun laid its flame
On the pines and wind raged in the teeth
Of days the flaming day would consume.

For the glade was burning between earth and sky,
And where the birds build nests they brood at evening
On burning limbs. O spirit of the wood, O dream
Of all who shall suffer in the glade at dusk—
And grass, grass, blossom through my feet like flame.

10

AN EVENING WALK

A butterfly tempted a dog up the hill.
The boy followed after, past the dung
Crumpled, the buggy fallen, the dinner-whetted hog
Grumbling like a human at knots in the garbage;
And there in the light of a yellow sun setting
The waterwheel cycling by the worn-out mill.

And where the land was hollowed as a nest
He had made welcomes to the mice and crickets,
Vagrant animals, chose of all rivers
Hickory Creek, befriended its beavers;
Here where the sapling tree had wound its roots.
Though always a train crying on its journey west.

Now cry again, and the meadowlark rode
Replying from the gloomy field where was its nest.
Day on a dwindling train was a small bright rose
That swung behind. A flock of hobo crows
Fastened on the last wheel and revolved west.
The cry hung his heart on the crossroad.

But silence held him. The bee had withdrawn
The last sweet drops and the sun disappeared.
He turned, and all below the night's hand
Touched already the accepting land.
Slowly he walked back, Hickory Creek murmured,
And a dog wagged up to him dancing for a bone.

WESTPORT

We dismounted and rested in the grass
The horses stood nearby and cropped the flowers.
The sapling maples blossomed a deep red
And Indian apple flowered around us.
Still on the ground the amaranth was swaying.
The dear forest would not buoy our feet again.

From a bare hilltop we could overlook
In all spring's directions beautiful
The changes on the world. Behind us stretched
The woods, that half a continent ago
Met our fathers on the Atlantic shore.
Before us lay the narrow belt of brush.
And there beyond, shifting like an ocean,
Swell after swell of emerald green, the
Prairies of the west were blowing.

We called
And mounted the horses, and set out,
Small craft into an endless green. The grass
Brushed the bellies of the horses, and under
The hoofs the knotted centuries of sod
Slowed the journey. Here and there the grey
Back of a wolf breached and fell, as in the grass
Their awkward voyages appeared and vanished.
Of the days ahead they were part and promise.

Then rain lashed down, a sudden storm. The whole
Afternoon it blew us west. "It will be
A long hard journey," the boy said, "And look,
We are driven like weed." And indeed we were. . .
(O wild indigo, O love-lies-bleeding—

12

You, prince's feather, pigweed, and bugseed—
Hold your ground for a day. We toss ahead
Of you a season, but we barely touch
The sad ambages compassed for yourselves.)

The rain abated. A red streak in the west
Lit all the raindrops on the land before us.
"Yes," I agreed, "It will be a hard journey,"
And the shining grasses were bowed down, as if
A western love had killed them. "But at last,"
I added, "the hardness is the thing you thank."
So out of forests we sailed onto plains,
And from the dark afternoon came a bright evening;

Now out of evening we discovered night
And heard the cries of the prairie and the moan
Of wind through the roots of its clinging flowers.

13

"AN ACT OF WILL IS NOT MERELY A DECISION..."

To the eminently reasonable question of who better could assess a poet's work than the poet himself there is only one really heretical answer, and that is: Almost anyone else. And yet it is an answer which has a rationale of a certain force, for anterior to the problem of self-evaluation (of one's work) is a problem impossible of useful solution: Where does one's work end and oneself begin?

It is hopeless—the two cannot be separated. This is why writers appear so frequently, when trying to comment on their own works, to be engaged in confession rather than criticism—and perhaps why they so seldom attempt to comment on their own works. But it is not an unfortunate circumstance: It tends to spare the writer the dangers of what could become for him an incestuous activity, at the same time it provides a legitimate place for criticism—which has become a full-time occupation in itself.

The writer can almost always elucidate his works better than anyone else, but the job of critical evaluation of his own creations (i.e. some sort of estimate of what are his best works and **why**) is not his proper job; it is the critical reader's. And not only is the writer—when it comes to speaking of his own works—disqualified from those evaluative aspects of criticism that one might at first expect him to handle most authoritatively; he is also, by the very nature of his work, disqualified from confession—evaluation of himself—outside his work.

It is no doubt a rage to order his experience (to quote Austin Warren's excellent term) that drives the writer in his activity, and he knows well enough, on that level of being where the rent, the laboratory, and politics exist, that the order he effects is not of the world itself but only of what appear to be his responses to it. Yet he must, to continue his activity, behave as if it were a world outside himself he criticized, weighed, organized;

he must, in fact—at the same time he knows an opposing truth—manage to **believe** it is in some measure an exterior world he orders. (This is his perilous way to that reality of which humankind can bear very little—as it is probably the madness for which Plato sent the poets off into exile.) So for the writer to concern himself very much with self-evaluation outside the process of his own works is to risk upsetting that paradoxical cart in which he carries whatever it is that ripens finally into his art.

If this argument cannot serve as exoneration, I hope it can serve as apology for the sparseness and looseness of the remarks that follow.

All of the poems here relate to problems that are or have been important to me, and therefore may reflect something of what involves me in poetry; most of them relate—though possibly in rather private ways in some instances—to a problem that has become central to my most recent work (and this is why I have selected them to appear here).

It seems to me the basic spiritual problems of man finally boil down to one which concerns the means of their solution: the problem of an act of will. But the problem is no easy one, for an act of will is not merely a decision; it is as many decisions as there are moments of consciousness; it is a discipline. An act of will is something it takes a long time to perform. And the only act of will possible is commitment to a belief—commitment in all one's thoughts, attitudes, and actions, to whatever it is one may find, on looking deeply into himself, of which he would say, "This is the way I would have things be."

Variously these poems are in search of a definition of the problem, or are efforts at coming to terms with it, or are in search of a belief, or in practice of one. I realize the same thing might be said of almost any poetry, but the problem of which I speak is not thematically important in a great deal of poetry. It does become thematically important through the course of most of the poems here.

Beyond this it is difficult to talk briefly about my

choice of poems without getting into immodest assertions or embarrassing reservations, and certainly if I were to try briefly to explain the choice of each of these poems in terms of the central problem of an act of will, I would not seem to be talking very accurately about many of them.

The relationship can be indicated for a few, however. A quite early poem that appears here, ("I Icarus"—which shows a certain bravado I still admire, and which seems to me tempered with the proper irony) begins to recognize the problem. "Genesis," which deals with the particular matter of guilt over failing the heavy and difficult disciplines of creation (an incessant problem, in any case, if the ultimate ideal of art is perfection and therefore impossible of attainment, but a special torment to the man who has not succeeded in making his world because he has not worked hard enough), on its way to its bitter resolution of that problem quite consciously faces the question of an act of will. "New Year Resolution," although its central concern is, ironically, one more despairing evasion, does present the idea of an act of will (in the concluding image) as something that cuts across and joins the infinite, parallel ways of mortal consciousness. "Islander" portrays one man's act of will which, though it may seem madness on one level of the poem's metaphor, transcends (I hope) even the concepts of sanity and madness on its ultimate level of meaning. And so on. The relationship may seem much more attenuated in the case of such poems as "Professor"—where the problem appears to be reconciling knowledge (of time and the tragic strain under which it places all mortality) with innocence—or "Dance," which presents a simple aesthetic; but it is there for me, which is all that matters so far as concerns my reasons for choosing these poems to be printed here. Otherwise all that counts is the poems themselves. They are outside all parentheses—.

Anthony Ostroff

NINE POEMS BY ANTHONY OSTROFF

GENESIS

I walked out in rain. All the bells were ringing
Quietly together for my lost cause.
I remembered heaven and earth in the beginning,
And where, like light, the forming darkness was,
But could not, if I ran, create or make movement
Where the rain chimed quietly together in the night,
Dividing world from world with each touch on the pavement.
O I by words was divided from my right!

The blind buildings, black streets—such closer stars
They were than any names, dreams, or longer
Histories, they rang close calendars
Of night for what my covenants with wrong were;
And I, who could not end a privilege
In sun, stood, bursting suns all unfulfilled,
Cold moons, half-seen and circling, strange half-bridges
I built from spinning world to world, half-willed.

The rain fell, ringing zeros where I walked shrouded
In silvery worlds of incompletely different days,
My loves' and trees' clean countenances clouded,
Landscapes lost in the misted, jingling ways
Of their round routes, and I cried for one great crashing
Of bells to end my pasts, prayed of the rain
A present, total sound with the flood's wide crushing
Weight where my wept worlds in the gutters ran.

Silence struck. The rain stopped then, and I,
Trembling with sound, stood striving for silence, hearing
At heart, like drums, the dreadful approach of the sky—
The diffident morning in which, like children, fear sings—
And quietly called for bells then, any bells,
Lest night should fail and show the earth remaining
Mortal, incomplete, with no deep wells
Of sound beneath its sounds after long raining.

A great, gray building's bell struck night, shaking
The sky with its literal wave, tolling absurd
And heavy time to its grave, incessant breaking.
I watched where the building rose and fell. I heard
From its enormous tower the wings of a pigeon
Clapping the day my innocent bells had rung.
A trolley dinged the world to a better religion;
Gods entered the streets, stood blinking in the sun.

ISLANDER

He was informed, by islands, of the world:
Each swam in liquid space; each whirled
Day after day, like stones, at the far white line
Of horizon; each was, at last, alone
(Though all were alike, all, to each, refrains).

Time was the quiet rush in his veins,
Heard rehearsed in the beaches' gleaming shells
Like water breaking on long, soft shoals;

He knew there was no edge to time, no shore
For afterward, as none before.

Still he went islanding with a sure delight.
The sun would fade, he would float on night
And with Dawn discover a kingdom wreathed in surf.
Each day he accomplished, thus, a birth—
The world: himself: his modesty and pride.

And always he was, with nothing to hide,
Between his days, thus hidden from other men,
Loving more to watch the huge moon
In argument with waves at night than to feel
Quibbles among islands more—or less—real.

PROFESSOR

Given buildings, lawns, hedges, sky,
Arranged by tradition, grays and greens
Accomplishing themselves by day
And night; given characters, gay
Innocence to fill the scenes
Here possible, and one in this to fill the eye
With his endeavor, it points so ridiculously high;

Given landscapes done by other hands,
Historic romances of color, shape,
Gesture, all vast burgeonings
Of other mind's imaginings,
And one who dreams bright escape

By these from all buildings, hedges, dark demands,
And obsessively preaches entrance to these unreal lands—

Given this, shall I remark my life
One to endure perpetual young looks
And fill their bright, masked innocence
With that gray, ponderous ignorance
Achieved in eternal museums of books,
Preach paper worlds to spring's and summer's swelling
grief,
Hold out my winter comfort of a paper leaf?

O I recall green worlds I sang
When I was young and far from words,
An innocence I thought to spend
Far differently, and now pretend
A clear, sure theory of birds—
Blind flight that bursts from clouds into a southern sun—
And I am bound by crimes that cannot be undone.

BLACKBIRD

All my lectures were well attended—
Speeches in several foreign tongues
Which none of the students understood;
But the room remained, to the room attentive,
While outside burned an autumn sun,
Turning to ash the native wood
Below the blackbird's circle of blood.

20

Thus it was in my first designing.
I saw the cold creep into the walls
To watch the talk, and, later, the stare
Of the urchin spring that faltered, signing
What nobody knew: that the blackbird called,
Stirring to fire the fermenting air
For the forest's blackened throat and ear.

O God is gray as my brain, beholding
Only eyes of ice—as were mine,
Blind before they fatally saw
The blackbird's brilliant, green-plumed scolding!
But shatter the high cold cliffs of time,
It is too late—I cannot thaw
My speechless world with a prophet's law!

For none have known, by the year's ending,
All the hue of the native wood,
Nor its total, terrible cry by heart;
None, though time flies well attended,
Have seen time go, nor understood,
Nor seen the sun take the blackbird's part
And wheel and caw in brazen flight!

NEW YEAR RESOLUTION

Tonight we cross another arbitrary line
(As in sailing our muddled days we somewhere cross
From Sunday to Monday, or Monday to Sunday,
And the same white wind whips and the same black waves
toss
The silly calendars we ride as if to grace)
Wishing this time decisively evil or benign.

All hands point to its resolution with such skill
The problem ends: Under cover of dark we'll sail
(As under the exact minute the hour slides
Calmly across the mysterious line, its sole
Mate and course) to One day, proving the line that hides
Parallel from parallel like an act of will.

DANCE

Bottle Green, Bottle Blue,
Beauty is no tinted glass
Curved around a yellow sun,
Light showing through.

Blue Glass, Glass Green,
Beauty is not made thus,
Nor ever made. Unlike sun
It is unforeseen.

Bottle Green, Bottle Blue,
Beauty is a sudden form
Of any us. It does not last—
This me with you.

22

STEWARTS POINT

To live or die: ceaselessly
In the small eternal tides, currents the sea
Casts up where is no shore and jagged rock
Threatens every craft, in ragged space
Like empty air stirred by the steady constriction
Of our influential sphere, it moves—a question
Or an idea.

Now there is truth
In the water's depth. The shelf
Falls into the dark, the deep
Where fishers drop their lines.
Too still. And now, proved
By the water's physical, pure faith
The simple matter of fact is stone
—And choice is possible: an act
Of will: to live or die.

So slow depths return.
Deep fires burn where they, unplumbed,
Concern the willing wind—far, far
Beyond reach or knowledge of land. The sea
Speaks. The land speaks with its tall pines.
Both dark. An arbitrary death
In the cool sunlight. All
Is coastal: life, death
—Easy occupations of the mind.

But heart!
What heart here beats its heavier tides
Through the afternoon, its laboring will
Difficult but, at last, indomitable?

Could that heart calmly pulse the ultimate night
Whose waves swim to a dark and perfect shore?

The heart is sure, beats on to calm,
And draws the settling evening in.
The gray horizon approaches the offshore isles.
The strong heart smiles for the steady seaward gulls
Breasting the wind on which the fog rides in.

OCTOBER: SPRING AGAIN

Spring again fills our shrivelling page
With swelling signals of the rose;
Pinks our aging signs. Sage
Mistress! She knows; She knows!

Lawn and willow green are writ,
Greenness into gold ascends,
And our soft stream of blood is lit
By leafy letters she expends.

Blue tints the time, and air
Invests the passage of the rose
With fragrances. We share
A last, illuminated pose.

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I, ICARUS

Blue air, blue sea, the intense blaze of noon,
Together undid Icarus. His eye
Enchanted by the scene, he had to fly.

I too, enamored of the sun
And of the sea and that long, decisive dive
He made, would fly. More brave, I stay alive!

An old maze still is here and unabsolved.
Though Icarus answered with casuistry
Too brilliant for the word-bound world to see,

He died (and so shall all). Thus he delved
No deeper than our future. I would sight
Daedalus and Minos before my flight!

Is this cowardly—my life, rightly named,
Neither myth nor fact if I aspire
Like Icarus but with deferred desire?

No simple, heroic fool sits here numbed
By circles in the screaming sea's pale sky!
I try the ghostly, far sun with poetry!

"AFTER A CERTAIN AGE ONE WANTS TO BE WARY"

If my mathematics is correct—which has always been unlikely—the verse herewith is almost exactly 50-50 published and unpublished. The unpublished portion, however, is the single poem "Memento." This is new, composed between October 1952 and March 1953. The poem called "Coleridge" first appeared in a 1952 issue of **Partisan Review.** The remaining poems have been taken, one apiece, from four of my five books. They date back from ten to nearly twenty years.

And there I should be happy to terminate my explanation of this representative choice. But editors have sterner notions: every now and then, at any rate, they think an amount of self-examination in print by poets is fun, and I can only hope they are right—that it is fun for editors and for readers. I mean, as to the poets: there are so many chances in life of making an ass of oneself that after a certain age one wants to be wary. Yet there is that temptation not too frequently offered us, as we all know, to talk about ourselves.

"Coleridge" is a particular case in point. I have included it because it is a fairly recent poem but primarily for a sentimental reason. It is a very personal poem. Its obvious subject is the mood of resumption. Not that I had ceased writing, but after twenty years of newspaper work I was at last free to resign and to use my life, so far as I was able, as my own. The reference of the poem is back to my initial experience of the revelation of poetry, which came in my second year of high school with reading "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Since that must have been in 1924, and "Coleridge" was set down in July 1951, here is a nice example of how even a short simple poem can take twenty-seven years. I should like to comment on one allusion because it involves a scene so touching that I shouldn't want a reader not to know it: "Detective of death in the boy's hand in the lane." Keats encountered Coleridge walking in a lane near

Highgate and asked the honor of shaking hands with him. When Coleridge was told, after Keats left, who the young man was, he said "There is death in that hand." (See Amy Lowell's **John Keats,** Vol. II. pp. 209-212.)

The earliest poem here is "The Fish Sonata." It comes from my first book, **Biography for Traman,** (1937). Traman is an anagram I concocted from "man" and "art", and I wish I had called him Smith or Jones or Scott or some such, but there it is; the linked poems of that book are yet another autobiographical portrait of the artist as a young man and several of his friends. There are too many derivations and fumblings in too many of the poems to make a majority of them savable, but I think "The Fish Sonata" belongs among the exceptions. It is not derivative nor fumbling; it has a mocking edge and then doubles it; it is somehow off at arm's length, objective, and under control. The poem is so far away I can speak of it as though it were someone else's. Still, it is a poem I remember writing: getting up from loafing on the grass in front of a summer shack, going in and putting it all down quickly. I think the play on "scales" occurred, oddly enough, without conscious anticipation. This was one that wrote itself. I wish it would happen oftener.

I suppose "The Ivory Bed" provides another example of the edged kind. Again the focus is unemotional but the tone is bitter; whereas the tone of the "Sonata" might be called merely wistful. The two, in any event, perhaps represent my occasional approach to being an intellectual poet—which for the most part I am not. The lovely lines by George Peele which set me off were written sometime in the second half of the 16th century. ("The Ivory Bed" comes from **Mr. Whittier and Other Poems,** 1948.)

Yeats says somewhere that now and then a young man will return to the sonnet form "to tighten his style"—though Yeats might have given a thought to how often the young man may simply loosen the sonnet. As a high school and college versifier I must have loosened and loosed hundreds; all about love. When years later I for a time took to writing sonnets again, I experimented in

various ways with the form and tried to make the content much solider. I have included one here, from a sequence of thirty-seven in **To Marry Strangers,** because of the currently unfashionable things it says.

"Shoetown," from **Wind the Clock,** seems to me particularly my kind of poem. It is the kind which some people prefer above any other sort of thing I have done and which some other people dismiss as prose. For better or worse I have frequently written the reminiscential or the biographical thing in these long, easy, conversational lines. Of course I have tried to give different poems a different character but the tones are analogous. This portrait of childhood city darkening into the Depression Era is an early, perhaps the first, sample. (There are a few revisions in the present text.)—No, I don't think it is prose, and though there are grounds for preferring tighter ways of verse I would defend this genre for certain effects peculiar to it.

Several times I have written a linked set of poems, designed to be taken as a single piece. I did it years ago in an **Elegy for Robinson,** (that is, Edwin Arlington Robinson), not so long ago in "Bermuda Suite", also in a few instances I should be glad to have you neglect. "Memento," contrary to "The Fish Sonata," is too recent for me to comment on it. You might say it is an elegy in terms of geography, those terms involving childhood-place, the strongest associations with the beloved dead, and the strange involvements of memory. In each death of those nearest us we die to some extent, yet we are also enlarged as sole carriers of memories once shared. It is an obliquely written elegy; in any case, I was unable to manage it any other way.

Winfield Townley Scott

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SIX POEMS
BY WINFIELD TOWNLEY SCOTT

MEMENTO
(B. T. S. 1885-1952)

I. This is a rocksaw seacoast.
Puddingstone lugs the thud of glacial death.
Nevertheless the thin earth of the clifftops
Hedges with wild roses the summer sea,
And I say this headland is for us forever
The sheriff of the morning star.

Far down there are cave-cuts where high tide
Jets a commotion of foam.
The sterile wear is slow is
A spoon of pearled emerald from a hundred years.
Yet eastward at evening the ocean
Takes credit for the moon.

Cow-sound foreign there our bell-buoy gong
Tins and tans; off Brenton Reef
Our lightship makes a medallion.
We have chained these things and now
Would see them only if they disappeared.
We are if we touch the waters a skirl of snow.

Though I have seen navies, vicious though ours,
Soundless past these islands, out of this bay,
Curve toward Gibraltar;
I have imagined dragon-headed ships
Arriving here ten centuries out of port
Loom in marine erasure of history.

Cantilevered into surf this coast
Juts nonhuman; graves of shipwrecked were
Hurricane-gouged; but the swallows
Fly in and out of the earth, fly through
Plunges of gulls that rise
White, shadowed, and white in the dulcet sun.

And I say of these weathers I choose
A seamless afternoon—mansion of glass
As huge as childhood—sea and sky: I say
For an ancient anchor grass-grown
This wreath of roses between stone and salt air
Is breath of the dead whose memories now are mine.

2. Will you hear that I spoke these stones and trees,
These stones under trees, trees over the houses,
These streets and walks, these dooryards hedged and
fenced
In the old way, this little town?
I say, without my voice this is all lost, it is nothing.
But I am the passionate marriage of memory and love
And which of you knows even my name or my voice?
How could you know today is today having forgotten
Yesterday and tomorrow.
Yet—whether
You hear or know—I speak: I say that here
Night pours westward off the back of the world
And the sea pours out the sun which rising
Shafts with its tiers of escalators
The moist streets of the morning;
and the streets
Fill with fathers, skip with schoolchildren,
They hush for cool cobbledy sound of horse and wagon
Somewhere around the corner and coming nearer;

They are lanes between lines of washing hung to dance
Over mothers and babies and sandboxes till noon.
Till I say **Sleep.** It is three o'clock. The sun
Inaccessible hovers a while stilled.
No footsteps—no door—no doorbell—all is emptied.
I alone stand, a fixed dream, and watch
That piazza opening through its leafless vines
And the wind in the rockingchair.

3. This lady's memory of these things is gone.
Of us and sixty-seven years her knowledge
Is gone. While you stare down at her long-loved face
The nonexistence which shakes you is your own.

Now you have come to stare at the statue of death
Its terror is in your recognition of it and,
Unlike a real statue, its failure to change,
Its inability to respond. And this conceived you.

From what you know, from what you can bear to see
This must be buried soon. And only for you
Now and always light is everywhere altered,
All the colors of the world are otherwise.

Whom do the mourners see? A girl—a ghost—
A bride—an old and tired lady—a stranger?
They pause and make her momentary replica.
Whom do the mourners see? Themselves. Themselves.

As wave into wave, so memory into memory
Folds, falls forward, follows till some far
And unimaginable coast receives forever
The final landfall of oblivion.

You remember fright and agony were here
But pain cannot be posthumous for her.

The burial signal is thunder and rain. Say **Sleep.**
Sleep, lady: no longer remember even me.

4. Psyche whose threnodic hands
Wash the winter darkness white
Move between the stars and starlight
Where the worlds are whirled to sands
Where all music disappears,
All the answers which we know
Less than shadow less than echo,
The emolument of tears
Turned immaculate fall of snow
Turned anonymous design
Strict as stars that as they fell
Fell unrecognizable,
Now no longer think to tell
Which were hers and which were mine,
Now no further realize—
Psyche whose threnodic hands
Heal the cicatrice of years—
What had soothed her hands and eyes.
Move between the sun and sunrise.

5. Again and yet again midsummer night
Hangs the prismatic curtains of the moon
Draping as with stilled and visible winds
The ocean's quietly dancing arches, leaping
Point Judith to Brenton Reef and to Saconnet
And sweeping past Aquidneck's phosphorent roofs
Stands in this lifting light on the great bay
And all its shadowy islands: Conanicut,
Gould and Rose and north to Coddington Cove
The twisted whale of Prudence Island—fixed

As in a mindless memory of love.

The moonlight seems to shudder. It is the sea's
Intermittent pausing pulse, its flicker
Of nerves, that shudder. And even these remote
As a sleeping face watched dimly in a mirror;
Watched carefully as though it might awaken
Although I know it will only disappear
And the emptied glass swirl to blueish fog
Quick to be lost in the moon's nameless color.
Although I think that deep within these waters
Stares the figurehead of a nameless lady
Whose long farewells speak from her lidless eyes.

Now this wide glass of sea is voyageless.
The lightship blinks for nothing. The bell-buoy
Bangs for danger of emptiness and home.
At the cliffbase the tide is a caress,
Neither impersonal nor aggressive now
But in an alien armistice feigning peace.
Now this land embodied by the dead
Moves in the kinship of the moon which is
A memory of light and which is love,
And gifted with roses' wild recurrent grace
Sets forth toward day on the rugosa sea.

SHOETOWN

I think every day of the city where I was a boy—
I remember all of it, too: not only the river road
Flanked with autumnal color nor gold-leaf water
Nor the slow hills around, nor the smoke of thin spring—

That was after the war; money was easy, and everyone
Kept up his lawn in summer evenings and went
For a ride in the new car and was mostly young—even
The Armenian and Italian shoestitchers got fur coats
And the Jews were buying up Main Street while the Yankees
Moved over a block or two, I remember; and the first to have
Radios—the Irish—bought big ones on installment.
The noise of things broken on the air began then

And in the daylight-saving we kids sat under neighbors' windows
To listen to the crackling notes of speech or jazz; and "Static," we said,
Sucking grass or wrestling or watching the fireflies
Bewildered over the new cellar holes in the near fields.

I remember the small bare bottoms of the kids I knew—
How they used to plunge and disappear and bounce out
Shining in the brown river in the afternoons, even until
The leaves were coming down brown and gold—O gosh, yes!

And that was not longer than ten—fifteen years ago
Before everything began to close up; the factories shut,
Houses unpainted along the frost-split streets and no
Macadam nor paint thought of, with clothes themselves patched;

Mr. Forrester shot himself at the Bank; Benny Goldstein
Lost his apartment houses; the stores took back the Armenians'
Rugs and furniture; the Italians moved on with the shops; the

Irish got on relief, and the Yankees voted for Hoover.

Two chickens in the pot around the corner.
"Static—static—static:" and all the while everywhere
Coming down the river and over the trees and up the steps and under
The evening grass the no-sound of everything breaking in air.

THE IVORY BED

> "Who has not beheld fair Venus in her pride
> Of nakedness, all alabaster white
> In Ivory bed, strait laid by Mars his side,
> And hath not been enchanted by the sight?"
>
> **—George Peele**

The treading pigeon arcs his wings
As though his love were sped with flight,
And muscular with morning flings
The slated sunrise out of night.

Below him in the public square
The sailor, soldier, and marine
Get up and go away to war
From copulation on the Green.

Strange girls get up and go away.
In grass beneath the General—
Immortal bronze assured on clay—
Death's flat and rubber fingers fall.

That generation drains to grass
Without the twenty years' delay
In which to learn for what it was.
So peace begins the winsome day.

COLERIDGE

Old father, blessed ghost, mariner
Of my launching, fixer of the bloody sun
Round which my condemned and lifelong voyage
Swerves and follows—follows again, ignorant
What tropic oceans, what icy straits
Hide ahead, or winds across the magnet
Shudder deeper than engines, or tides
Trouble the ways before the invisible pole
Set under that unsetting sun;
old talker
Glittering through my childhood—voice and eyes
Compellent to hold, to send me out to
Find home by way of Vinland, India, by
Horns of undiscovered coasts that sounded
Music undeniable till the sea
Flamed with mirage that grayed all gold;
old
Detective of death in the boy's hand in the lane—
Resolve my life again. By this invocation
Invoke me, blessed ghost, old father.

A SONNET

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Much has been said of flowers' ignorance:
How in the face of human death and doom,
How in the very road of war's advance,
Violet and buttercup sit out and bloom;
As though they were God's pet extravagance
Morning-glories bugle round a tomb
That knows no Easter; or as to enhance

A night-bombed home, there's cereus in the gloom.
And nations with their troubles will remark
Similarly of stars whose quiet gaze
On love and murder equally lights the dark
With cold contradictions that amaze
The adult race which mostly hesitates to
Destroy a flower, though children often do.

THE FISH SONATA

Having banged the piano too hard
Traman turned and looked around
And seeing his friends assembled said
"To hell with that Almighty sound.

It is," he said—with something still
Resembling an enlarging air—
"My **Fish Sonata:** oversoul
Voyaging an underworld despair.

While less than panoramic zeal
Eliminated vaster plans,
I found myself intrigued between
The tadpoles and leviathans;—

Then plumped for giants. And you've heard:
A mackerel music round the whales.
There's nothing drier than dried fish.
Drink up, and I will practise scales."

And Traman thereupon swung back
And found the keys as clean and fair;
And, thinking over what he'd said,
Wished his friends were really there.